



India experiences





# Rajasthan Rocks!

*Travelers are wising-up to staged "local encounters" which have become little more than human safaris. In the Rajasthan region, for example, independent and privately-owned hotel owners uplift their immediate communities and have savvy local guiding explorers around. This way, you get to see genuine village life without intruding—which is where the magic of travel truly lies.*

by Cindy-Lou Dale

Visiting a remote Garasia tribal village, accessible only on foot, I meet an elderly lady and her mother, who together oversee the village during the day, looking after the children, while the fathers tend the fields and the mothers sell vegetables at the market. The ladies live in a home with a grass reed roof held up by four posts and two reed walls. There are raised reed beds directly beside a goat pen, a fire pit for cooking, and suspended reed baskets for the chickens to sleep in at night. While the children do their chores, the daughter proudly shows me around, then invites me to squat under a Banyan tree, makes tea, and tells me about her modest life.

## LIKE STAYING AT THE MUSEUM

Where you'll find these deeply cultural experiences are off-the-beaten-tourist-track villages and the privately-owned hotels in them, like the Ghanerao Heritage Hotel. The streets of Ghanerao village are clean, the ramshackle homes are painted in vibrant colors, and the locals are happy to see visitors.

There are definite Best Exotic Marigold Hotel characteristics to a stay at the Ghanerao Heritage Hotel but in the best possible way imaginable. Forget the 21st century, this is living history. Although crumbling and somewhat run-down, this once dilapidated, incredibly picturesque castle, draped in bougainvillea creepers, with hidden courtyards and sun-trap terraces, has been restored one room at a time.

Built in 1606, by a gallant Rajput soldier of Mewar, Ghanerao Heritage Castle is a huge maze-like mansion with hidden tunnels and passageways. It's like sleeping in a museum filled with interesting artifacts that provide



magical insight into the lavish lifestyle of past royalty.

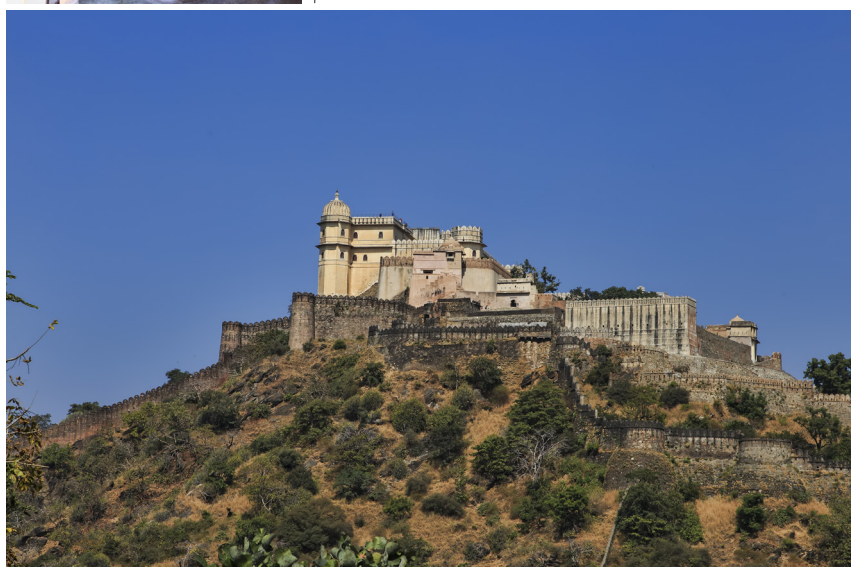
Each of its 15 renovated guest rooms is unique. Some have canopied beds and stained-glass windows; others have antique sofas, chandeliers, ornate alcoves and frescoes, but all are furnished with genuine antiques, some restored, most not. Dinner is a take-what-you're-given affair, which is authentic, flavorful and aromatic Rajasthani dishes.

The trade-offs are no mod-cons—the internet is available only on the beautiful marble terrace and there's no real reception desk, so it's difficult to reach service staff (in-room phones). The aircon is iffy and if you remember to turn on the water heater, you may have a warm shower. But the hotel does offer an escorted tour of the village, where you'll no doubt be followed by cows seeking treats, meet the man who repairs bicycle punctures, a lady that hand-makes leather slippers and another milling grain.

You may instinctively want to opt for modern five-star luxury, but in this case, the compromise is worth making as the atmosphere, history and art are genuine and everything is sufficiently comfortable. So, go with the flow and forget Western-world's ideals as this is "Incredible India" in every sense of the word.

**Must do:** Spend a morning with a local Raika tribe and learn how they milk their camels—standing stalk-like on one leg, directing the milk flow at a jug balanced on one knee. This is followed by camel milk tea brewed on an open flame, and a quick overview of the medicinal benefits of camel milk which, due to its high nutritional value is regarded as a staple part of their diet. The Raika use it not only as a drink but as a complete food supplement.

[www.ghanerao.com](http://www.ghanerao.com)







## India experiences



### LEOPARD SPOTTING AT CASTLE BERA

Castle Bera, an equally authentic hotel found in the small hamlet of Bera in the Jawai region is renowned for its leopard population located in the nearby granite hills. It's a grand 300-year old ancestral castle, once home to the son of the great ruler, Maharana Pratap.

This 16th-century castle has five spacious, air-conditioned guest rooms. It's run as a home-stay and is overflowing with antiques, hunting trophies, memorabilia, family history and displayed on the walls are pictures of stiffly posing royalty. As with Ghanerao, there's no in-room phones, 24-hour room service or wi-fi.

The garden is immaculate, and a magnet for local birdlife and butterflies. The food is traditional with no menu choices, which allows you to try out a large selection of new and exceptional tastes—none of which will disappoint. And you're pretty much guaranteed several leopard sightings at the dawn and dusk safaris.

There's a sense of faded grandeur to this grande dame, yet it's immensely comfortable, with basic facilities but genuinely courteous, unhurried service. Don't go expecting 5-star luxury but do anticipate being wowed by the generosity of Castle Bera's young owner, Yadu Singh, and his father Winku, who'll regale you with historical tales of the castle's royal hunting grounds.

**Must do:** Partake in a cooking class using traditional recipes from Castle Bera's hereditary cookbook; and take a royal picnic at the nearby Jawai Dam.

[www.castlebera.com](http://www.castlebera.com)

### LUXURY AT THE MOUNTBATTEN LODGE

Should you be hankering after unadulterated five-star luxury, head to the Aravalli Mountains near Ranakpur; you'll find opulence in abundance at the modern Mountbatten Lodge.

The common areas are adorned with tented ceilings, ornate chandeliers and hard-wood colonial furniture. You'll meet the Singh family empire, in their royal regalia, proudly



displayed in paintings and photographs. Style, finesse, and luxury permeate from every one of Mountbatten Lodge's four suites. Some have four-poster beds, private swimming pools and patios, but all are dressed in priceless colonial antiques, heirloom rugs, bronze curtains that puddle on the polished wooden floors, large mirrors and hammam-style bathrooms.

Sitting under a 300-year old Banyan tree, indulging in a spectacular Anglo-Indian lunch, 40s jazz playing softly in the background, owner Reggie Singh, grandson of Maharaj Ratan Singh of Jodhpur, speaks about his Marwari horse safaris. There are not many breeds as intriguing, noble and courageous as the tall and majestic pointy-eared steeds. These former warhorses and mounts of the maharajas and princes of India, now trek through the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary, transporting his visitors from one designer campsite to another and through protected forests filled with wildlife and temples. There's also the opportunity to swap the Marwari horses for elephants. You also get to partake in a horseback leopard safari, deep in big-cat terrain, near Castle Bera.

**Must do:** Enjoy a hilltop sunset, sipping champagne and join a Garasia tribal village visit.

[www.mountbattenlodge.com](http://www.mountbattenlodge.com)

Whenever asked where to go on the first-ever visit to India, I now have the definitive answer: aromatic and color-soaked Rajasthan, a region that indulges your every romantic notion of India, complete with camels, turbaned tribesmen, palaces, snake charmers and kings. Here old rituals of politeness and respect hold sway.

[www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)

*India is a vast land worth exploring so take the route less traveled and immerse yourself entirely with unique and genuine Indian encounters and experiences.*

**WOW**

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